

## *Emily Dickinson and Her Artistic Credo*

By Fumiko Takase

The Only One I met  
Is God—The Only Street—  
Existence— (827) <sup>1</sup>

An incensed clerical reader of the 1890's attacked the following poem of Emily Dickinson's as one of the most offensive pieces of Unitarianism ever published. <sup>2</sup>

God is a distant—stately Lover—  
Woos, as He states us—by His Son—  
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship—  
“Miles”, and “Priscilla”, were such an One—  
  
But, lest the Soul—like fair “Priscilla”  
Choose the Envoy—and spurn the Groom—  
Vouches, with hyperbolic archness—  
“Miles”, and “John Alden” were Synonym— (357)

That reader must have thought that faith was not a matter of human choice, and that the poet mocked the Trinity—the oneness of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost—because in this poem she blasphemously calls Jesus the “Envoy” and God the “Groom” and also juxtaposes them with the earthly figures of John Alden and Miles. He must have been piqued at the analogy of God's love to human wooing and the depiction of it as a “Vicarious Courtship,” not a real one, but a substitute. In Longfellow's poem which this piece of work parodies, Priscilla spurns Miles and says archly to John, his agent, that the warrior will be happier pursuing the Indians than commanding a household. <sup>3</sup> Here, it is God that “vouches” with “hyperbolic archness,” a fit behavior for a “distant—stately” Lover.” The fundamental idea, however, is that God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son in the world; and it is God that affirms the Trinity by the metaphor

that Miles and John are the same. There is actually nothing to object to in the Holy concept: nevertheless, we recognize that the theme of abstractions, such as God's love, the Trinity, and the Soul, is coupled with the expression familiar and humorous, through the union of which the abstractions are almost anthropomorphized—they woo, spurn, and choose. This incongruity between the timeless theme and the temporal expression on the surface must have baffled some of the poet's contemporaries, but it certainly gives us some insight into her concept of religion as well as into her poetic technique. This paper is intended to study the evolvment of Emily Dickinson's religious ideas together with her credo of the artistic representation of these concepts because the two seem so inevitably related to each other in her poems.

The angry reader of the 1890's said that the poem was a piece of Unitarianism, but as a matter of fact, the poet had little to do with that denomination. Amherst, her native place, in the nineteenth century, was a self-sufficient village, undisturbed by the Unitarian stir in Boston against the domination of Puritan theocracy, free from such mercantile centers as New Haven, Hartford, and Springfield, and not much influenced by the flowering of American literature through Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, and Whitman. Historically, the villagers were inheritors of the Congregationalism of the Connecticut Commonwealth built by Thomas Hooker, who had as much dislike for the dictatorial rule of "saints," the elect, of the Puritan theocracy as he had for that of Bishops, and whose idea is said to be the core of American democracy:<sup>4</sup> "The foundation of authority is laid, firstly, in the free consent of the people, and therefore the choice of magistrates belongs unto the people, by God's allowance."<sup>5</sup> The rebellion against the Puritan domination had come about, in short, from people's criticism of the inversion of the original Calvinistic doctrines, with which Puritanism was so much imprinted—the absolute surrender to God's Will and the

idea that "that alone is true faith which the spirit of God seals in our hearts,"<sup>6</sup> for these doctrines ironically had led to a movement of thought that entirely undermined the authority of both church and the Bible and established in their place the authority of the human mind.

Amherst, fortunately enough, was not exposed to such tyranny of the spiritual bigotry from the start and remained loyal to the founder's teaching as an independent cosmos outside of the political, economical, and religious movements. Its leaders were mostly Congregationalist ministers, usually university graduates, who contributed to the intellectual climate of the village by helping build public institutions—schools, banks, railroads, and the like. This type of self-complacency was ready to develop an external social conformity here as elsewhere: the common idea of respectability among neighbors whose spiritual disorder might not be evident at the surface sometimes produced some spiritual sterility inside, and on such a soil the Genteel Tradition prospered—a mildly didactic order of behavior, which regarded as symptoms of dissipation card-games, dancing, or novel-reading.

Emily Dickinson very well pictures in a poem such an aspect of the village, where religion occupied the center of social life:

It will be Summer—eventually.  
Ladies—with parasols—  
Sauntering Gentlemen—with Canes—  
And little Girls—with Dolls—  
  
Will tint the pallid landscape—  
As 'twere a bright Bouquet—  
Tho' drifted deep, in Parian—  
The Village lies—today—  
  
The Lilacs—bending many a year—  
Will sway with purple load—  
The Bees—will not despise the tune—  
Their Forefathers—have hummed—  
  
The Wild Rose—redden in the Bog—  
The Aster—on the Hill  
Her everlasting fashion—set—  
And Covenant Gentians—frill—

Till Summer folds her miracle—  
As Women—do—their Gown—  
Or Priests—adjust the Symbols—  
When Sacrament—is done— (342)

Here the poet stresses the long range of time with no change, no progress, but with the set pattern of living. The ladies with parasols, the gentlemen with canes, the girls with dolls go to church without a hurry, "sauntering." The lilacs are bending for many years; the villagers unashamedly sing the same old tune that their forefathers did; the "everlasting" fashion of the flowers is "set" like the "Covenant." Yet the change in color in summer which enlivens the death-like landscape alludes to the momentary ecstasy of the Sacrament and which the poet calls the "miracle" of summer, though it is of short duration. The porcelain-like, eventless life will drift into summer, "eventually," and, after summer is over, fall back into its "Parian" way of living again. The expiration of the "miracle" is sharply contrasted with the familiar imagery of women's folding their gowns and the priests' adjustment of the "Symbols" after the Sacrament. Nothing in religion or nature can stir the mind to getting a new, individual perception or even to distinguishing one's own free will from the uniform customary behavior.

The problem of true faith and free will had ever been haunting Emily Dickinson's mind. As early as in 1846 she had some notion of her own destiny. She felt herself "sailing upon the brink of an awful precipice," from which she could not escape. She could not conform to other people's way of living because in her opinion they were afraid to do otherwise and gave to God the "miserable recompense of a sick bed for all his kindness to them."<sup>7</sup> At Mount Holyoke Female Seminary she remained, in spite of Miss Mary Lyon's Evangelical zeal, "one of the lingering bad ones" because it was hard for her to give up the world and accept Christianity without deceiving her conscience.<sup>8</sup>

Her penetration beneath the appearance of piety, deluded complacency and hypocrisy with no love inside is projected thus:

What Soft—Cherubic Creatures—  
These Gentlewomen are—  
One would as soon assault a Plush—  
Or violate a Star—  
.....  
.....

It's such a common—Glory—  
A Fisherman's—Degree—  
Redemption—Brittle Lady—  
Be so—ashamed of Thee— (401)

The appearance of the women at the surface enforced by "Soft," "Cherubic," "Gentlewomen" is placed in ironic contrast with the final epithet, "Brittle," with a capital "B." Their intrinsic value is illustrated by actions—"assault" and "violate a Star" in Heaven. After emphasizing the universality of God's Glory with the term, "common," the poet sets, in vivid comparison, the social statuses of "a Fisherman" and the "Lady," and the real spiritual significance of "Redemption" over against such a "Brittle Lady" with a materialistic connotation—one who is easy to break. The dehumanization of the women must go back to the contemptuous word, "Creatures" in the first line of the poem, and the whole criticism of the gentlewomen ends with the poet's moral judgment—"ashamed of Thee."

Emily Dickinson's gradual withdrawal from church attendance is reported to have become absolute in her mid-twenties, for

He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow—  
The Broad are too broad to define  
And of "Truth" until it proclaimed him a Liar—  
The Truth never flaunted a Sign—  
.....  
.....

What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus  
To meet so enabled a Man! (1207)

She probes the irony of "so enabled a Man" whose every pretentious righteousness eventually defines his own identity as a "Liar." "God of Width" (1231), "The Broad," can not be measured by the human mind and hypocrisy itself is not only self—

destructive but also, the poet adds, embarrasses Jesus through whom God's Will is revealed. She strongly points out that human elements—the clergyman's attitude here—spoil the simple Christian truth.

In place of listening to such a preacher at church, she would rather have God speak to her at home :

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
I'm going, all along. (324)

In her characteristic way of composition, God becomes a "noted Clergyman." What makes her pleased is that His sermon is short whereas the earthly one's is long and flaunting. This poem is the poet's declaration of her non-conformity to the ordinary, sterile way of living, at least, as far as religion is concerned. Though she writes that instead of getting to Heaven she is going along, "at last," separated from "getting to Heaven" with a comma, paradoxically suggests her conviction that she will reach it in her own way because she monopolizes God as her preacher !

This New England woman who was not easily deluded by the religious complacency at the surface kept questioning fundamental concepts of life which usually people avoid, for she knew, as we have seen in her previous poems, that the truth that the human mind could grasp might be different from what God actually expounds :

In 1860 she sent a letter to Samuel Bowles of the *Springfield Republican*, one of the closest friends of the Dickinson family, in which there was a poem enclosed :

"Faith" is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can see—  
But Microscopes are prudent  
In an emergency. (185)

The faith of the Puritan forefathers is examined here. Faith is deliberately juxtaposed with microscopes, tools of science, but the comparison is confined to a matter of human insight. The Latinate word, "invention," in the first line is quite as unex-

pected an image as a Metaphysical conceit. By this term faith is rendered a mechanical thing. The New Englanders' Puritan theocracy was an experiment on God's commonwealth on earth, an invention. The epithet for microscopes is "prudent," which means worldly-wise and is "associated in American history with Benjamin Franklin, the great advocate of rational utility." <sup>8</sup>

Prudence has another significance: it was one of the Cardinal Virtues in the Middle Ages. As a result, faith on a metaphysical plane is given a mechanical connotation, while microscopes on a mechanical level are endowed with a Cardinal Virtue and the capacity to perceive the meaning beneath the surface of matters. We should not be hasty, however, concluding that the poet is anti-Christian. This faith is an instrument for "Gentlemen." As far as we have seen, gentlemen and gentlewomen are made to be content with the superficialities of life. We do not know what the "Gentlemen" see in this poem or what the emergency means, but the definition of faith may suggest, on the one hand, the decay of religion—at least, the religion reduced to the qualification necessary for being called gentlemen. On the other hand, Science is placed above the gentlemen's faith because of their blindness, inability to penetrate underneath the appearance of things.

Though the microscopes are by no means omnipotent, the invention of these tools helped solve the emergency of diseases hitherto incurable by discovering bacteria, while in the spiritual matters the crisis was especially great during the latter half of the nineteenth century through the progress of science, exemplified by Darwinism, decadence, pessimism, and Nietzsche's idea of the Superman. We do not guess whether Emily Dickinson knew these or not, but we read that the poet could precisely depict the inevitable conflict between religion and science into sixteen words one hundred years earlier than our age when we feel the pressure of science as a real emergency.

The Bible, in which she dug up such a rich mine of idioms, parables, and ideas, could not escape her scrutiny:

The Bible is an antique Volume -  
 Written by faded Men  
 At the suggestion of Holy Spectres -  
 Subjects - Bethlehem -  
 Eden - the ancient Homestead -  
 Satan - the Brigadier -  
 Judas - the Great Defaulter -  
 David - the Troubadour -  
 Sin - a distinguished Precipice  
 Others must resist -  
 Boys that "believe" are very lonesome" -  
 Other Boys are "lost" -  
 Had but the Tale a warbling Teller -  
 All the Boys would come -  
 Orpheus' Sermon captivated -  
 It did not condemn - (1545)

She sent this poem as a message to her nephew Edward, then an undergraduate student at Amherst College. The words are chosen and arranged so as to meet the mood of the young boy. "Antique" and "faded" imply that the Bible is already obsolete to the modern eye. The biblical names—Eden, Satan, David, Judas—are playfully paralleled with the "ancient Homestead," the "Brigadier," the "Troubadour," and the "Great Defaulter," but not without a tincture of similarity. The problem of sin is analogized by a "Precipice" that everybody can clearly see. The Holy Scripture, as usual, is dragged down to the human level that people are familiar with and understand. The irony is that whether they believe or not, boys are unhappy: on the side of the faithful, they are lonesome; on the other, the unfaithful are lost. On either side the "antique Volume" has lost its charm. The poet suggests a remedy. "A warbling Teller," (though "warbling" sounds like a manner of a bird and irresponsible, but not unpleasant,) an Orpheus, is needed for restoring the liveliness to the faded Tale because the heathen poet did not say "thou shalt not." It seems that her opinion was that the Bible was written a long time ago by human beings, who interpreted the revelation of God's Will, and that its everlasting teachings would be brought up to date by a manner of preaching different from that of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the leader



of New England revivalism in the Great Awakening of 1740–1741, who sensationally terrorized people by the images of the sinners in the hands of an angry God and in a hell of brimstone.<sup>10</sup>

While the poet somehow lessens the dignity of Eden, David, and saints, she is not very hard on Satan and Judas listed intermingled with good ones. Especially the “Brigadier” has no bad meaning at all. She even sings in another poem that the Devil would be the best friend “if he had fidelity/ Because he has ability” (1473). Her peculiar sympathy with the great sinners may have come from her realization of Satan as the hero of “Paradise Lost” and the religious idea that Evil exists ultimately to prove the goodness of Providence and that the Crucifixion is the necessary process of the proving; so that we should not blame the poor sinners too cruelly.

Contrary to this lenience, she was very stern to God’s seeming injustice which she could not understand. She did not hesitate to identify God with tyranny in *Abraham to kill him* (1317) based on the story that God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and she satirized the moral of the human sacrifice by God’s command in the ironic reflection that even a mastiff, a devouring monster, has better manners. She seemed never to comprehend the idea of a jealous God and the Calvinistic five points—total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints,<sup>12</sup> which were perpetually propounded from her contemporary pulpits. She even lets the speaker in one poem apologize to God for His own “Duplicity” (1461), blaming the concept that God has created man in His image, furnished him with reason, only to reduce him to dust.

She was in full rebellion against such imposed patterns of the interpretation of God and life :

So I pulled my Stockings off  
Wading in the Water  
For the Disobedience’ Sake  
Boys that lived for “Ought to”

Went to Heaven perhaps at Death  
And perhaps he did'nt  
Moses was'nt fairly used—  
Ananias was'nt — (1201)

Adopting an allegorical form, the poet projects her intensified feeling of protest against God's treatment of man, the doctrine of absolute surrender to such a God, and the smothering Christian duties into the picture of a girl violating the Genteel Tradition by putting off her stockings and wading in the water with no other reason than for disobedience' sake, in defiance against the proper behavior grounded on "Ought to." With an ironic twist the artist says—the obedient boys perhaps did or did not go to Heaven because of the biblical examples where Moses and Ananias who lived according to "Ought to" were not fairly treated. However, her use of the persona, "A supposed person," goes on describing the disastrous result of such a riot:

I took my Power in my Hand—  
And went against the World—  
'Twas not so much as David—had—  
But I—was twice as bold—  
  
I aimed my Pebble—but Myself  
Was all the one that fell—  
Was it Goliath—was too large—  
Or was myself—too small ? (540)

Emily Dickinson's awareness of her ultimate defeat in such a single-handed combat against the evil of the world symbolized by Goliath is sadly illustrated by the reversed outcome of the David-Goliath story in the Bible. But the poem is written in the past tense and "The World is not Conclusion," and is revealed through "Riddles" (501). Moreover, the poet despised the riddles that she could easily guess (1222). In her life-long pursuit of the Riddles of life in her own way, however, she constantly felt "Loss of something" and suspected that she was "looking opposite/ For the site of Kingdom of Heaven—" (599).

She went to God, face to face, and prayed:

Of course—I prayed—  
And did God Care ?

He cared as much as on the Air  
 A Bird—had stamped her foot—  
 And cried "Give Me"—  
 My Reason—Life—  
 I had not had—but for Yourself—  
 'Twere better Charity  
 To leave me in the Atom's Tomb—  
 Merry, and Nought, and gay and numb—  
 Than this smart Misery. (376)

These lines were attached to her letter to a friend, Maria Whitney, who had been slow in answering her letter, and the poet wrote: "You are like God. We pray to Him, and He answers 'No.' Yet, 'seek and ye shall find' is the boon of faith."

So, evidently, the poem moves on a twofold plane—divine and human. Like a Metaphysical conceit, the colloquialism in "Of course," the first two words, assaults the reader's conventional expectancy in poetry and introduces her to the pressure of the intensity of the poet's feeling. In answer to the religious term—"prayed"—its necessary reward, "Care," is repeated in the following line and dissolved into the "Air," deliberately linked by the rhyme—scheme in "Care" and "Air." The eagerness and impatience of the prayer's mind are visualized by a "Bird" stamping her foot, crying "Give Me." Such a small insignificant, unnoticeable plea! The value of the prayer at once diminishes through the analogy to the little figure of the "Bird." But the prayer's as well as the "Bird's" plea is the assertion of their self and their self-interest. This is why the next line begins with "My Reason—Life," which stresses the urgency of the prayer, meaning that on her prayer depends the speaker's whole existence. Accordingly, "Give Me" and "My Reason—Life" are expressed in spondee, vivifying the significance of the self. "My Reason—Life/ I had not had—but for Yourself—" "Life" and "Yourself" are related by the diminutive alliteration of "l" and "f". In "you" who are neglectful of "me", the value of "My Life" dwindles. We must here notice also that there has been done a sly shift in the use of the pronouns—from "He" to "You." On the one hand the speaker has turned directly to God; on the

other hand she has started talking to her friend, who, god-like, does not answer her. The dwindling, as a consequence, increases from the divine to the human level, from the human to a thing, "Atom," an invisible, smallest microsome, which is confined in the "Tomb," dead and unfeeling. An ambiguous juxtaposition of the extremes—"Merry," "Nought," and "gay" and "numb"—with an emphasizing repetition of "n", goes back to sharpen the meaning and the sustained image of "Atom's Tomb," of the dead, neglected friendship or divine love, which has been reduced to nonexistence. The device also depicts the speaker's suffering from being placed in the void. If Reason does not work, if Life is no longer in her, she is merry and gay because she is as "Nought" and "numb" as the dead. But she is alive and Reason is active. No answer for her prayer hurts her "smart" and she is tortured by the sense of "Misery." Misery seems to carry a religious connotation—unheeded at once by God and by friends. In this respect "Charity" is put in a dramatic contrast with "Misery," deliberately rhymed with each other. The speaker would rather ensconce herself in the tomb than be tantalized by their indifference. Superficially, the poem ends with her wish totally to be deserted, but the tone, if we listen carefully, tells the opposite. As the irregular meter running through shows, in her bewilderment at God's unconcern or her friend's, she throws her anger at and her protest against them. Her plea is undoubtedly "Give Me," their recognition of her identity.

To have herself properly answered, the poet even offered her precious self to God :

I asked no other thing—  
 No other—was denied—  
 I offered Being—for it—  
 The Mighty Merchant sneered—

Brazil ? He twirled a Button—  
 Without a glance my way—  
 "But—Madam—is there nothing else—  
 That We can show—Today ?" (621)

The immediacy and importance of the speaker's request are stressed by the repetition of "no other" and her offering of her "Being" as the payment. The linkage of "denied" and "sneered" by the rhyme-scheme confronts the emergency like the Iron Wall. The antagonist is "Mighty"; he "twirled" a "Button," which needs no concern of his, set in comparison in weight with the customer's wish—"Brazil," the unknown land of bliss, bound by the assonance of "b". The "Merchant" neglects even paying a glance at the pathetic girl for manner's sake as in the poem of *Abraham to kill him*. Contrary to the Bible in which Jesus taught, "Or what man of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?" (Matthew, VII. ix), the "Merchant" asks, "Is there nothing else?" Man's suffering from divine unconcern and sneer at his serious asking is, however, paralleled with the humorous echo of the poet's letter to a friend in which she wrote, "'Is there nothing else?' as the clerk says?"<sup>15</sup>

The intermingling of the grave theme with the mundane expression and tone indicates the poet's formidable detachment to such a spiritual crisis. She knew how to externalize profound emotions involved and this type of artifice was her weapon with which to fight a cosmic fight and also make herself a great artist.

In addition to her poetic technique to gain detachment, Emily Dickinson's inclination to think religious and philosophical matters in terms of legal and financial business may have come, in part, from her discovery of the expression fit for these problems in the imagery of the trade which had "suddenly encroached/ Upon a Sacrament" (812). Heaven seemed to her a remote bank where she could save her felicity and draw its interest as we see in *Is Heaven an Exchequer?* (1270).

She counted her losses :

I never lost as much but twice,  
And that was in the sod.  
Twice have I stood a beggar  
Before the door of God !

Angels—twice descending  
Reimbursed my store—  
Burglar ! Banker—Father !  
I am poor once more ! (49)

The poem speaks of the bereavement "twice," perhaps, by the deaths of her two important friends—Leonard Humphrey, a teacher at Amherst Academy who died in 1850, her first affliction, and Benjamin Franklin Newton, a law-student of her father's office in 1847, who found a talent as a poet in her and died in 1853.

The speaker begins with her quiet resignation expressed in Common Meter, the casual, reserved way of mentioning the losses through the negation of many—"never lost as much but twice." But the matter-of-fact statement is contrasted with the picture of tremendous terror depicted by the dehumanizing of the friends by the term, "that", and by the "sod". The mounting progression of feeling and disturbance corresponds to the metrical shift from Common Meter in the first stanza to the irregular meter in trochee in Sixes and Fives in the second. The poet epitomizes all the emotions involved in the deaths into "losses," which is analogous to "financial loss." Accordingly, God becomes a shrewd "Banker," who trades on the give-and-take principle, after being called a "Burglar" because He has caused the speaker twice the loss of all she had. "Lost" has a multiple meaning: in a theological sense it means the loss of God's bliss, damnation; in a financial way it is the loss of property; on the human level it indicates the loss of friends by death. Everything comes from God's Will. It is He who has made her a "beggar," depriving her of her property, physical or spiritual. The Latinate word, "Reimbursed," is related to Redemption and also implies repentance on the part of God because He has sent angels to refill her store. The girl finally reconciles herself to God, calling Him Father because she is poor once more: "poor" certainly alludes to Jesus' Sermon on the Mountain—"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew,

V. iii). The rhetorical shock of the list of "Burglar," "Banker," and "Father" instead of the Trinity, however, paradoxically illumines the depth of the speaker's suffering and sorrow.

The acute grief for losses due to the disintegrating force of death tormented the poet, yet at the same time it led her to ponder over the dichotomy of soul and body, the infinite and the finite in man :

I felt my life with both my hands  
To see if it was there —  
.....  
.....  
I turned my Being round and round  
And paused at every pound  
To ask the Owner's name — ..... (351)

And she perceived that "The Body grows without—" (578) and that the soul is "its Sovereign" (683), "Finite infinity" (1695), the riddle of the riddles, and the epitome of the whole world. Thus the whole world scheme shrank to the individual consciousness and, to explore the infinite in the finite, she declared:

The Soul selects her own Society —  
Then—shuts the Door —  
To her divine Majority —  
Present no more —  
  
Unmoved—she notes the chariots—pausing—  
At her low Gate —  
Unmoved—an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat —  
  
I've known her—from an ample nation —  
Choose One —  
Then—close the Valves of her attention —  
Like Stone —

This work should be regarded as Emily Dickinson's manifesto of independence in art and in life. In fact, in the first two lines the "s" sound is predominant, enforcing the renunciation or the Soul's own Society as in "Soul," "select," "Society," followed by the determined action of "shuts". The Soul has gone to "her divine Majority." "Majority" has many meanings—the rank of a major in the army; "to go over to the majority" means "to die";

"to attain one's majority" is "to reach the age," maturity, recognized both by oneself and others. The epithet for it, "divine," may allude that that "Majority" is God, poetry, or the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, the poet's third important friend or lover who became her muse. In any way, when a boy reaches his maturity or becomes a major, he must be devoted to the military training. The second stanza, as a result, moves on a series of military images. The Soul who is with her selected Society inside the Door notes charits pausing. The firmness of her determination no more to present is illustrated by a repetition of "Unmoved" at the beginning of the lines and the image of "an Emperor be kneeling" for her presence, whose rank is much higher than that of a major. These grand military figures, moreover, are placed on the humiliating spots—"at her low Gate" and "upon her Mat" in comparison with the superiority of her "Door" without any epithet. The speaker proudly inserts—"I've known her." That Soul is her close acquaintance. The third stanza is occupied by materialistic images: "ample," rich in material resources, is set in contrast with "divine" in the first stanza. Over against "Majority," "nation" begins with a small letter though it is a collective noun and includes a number of people in it, indicative of the Soul's selection of "One" out of so many. "Choose" and "close" are linked by "c" and "s", echoing "shuts" in the first stanza, of the same meaning as "close" and also the poet's idea that "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue" and is "the Choosing" (745). "Valves" is a mechanical word but it signifies also the valves of the heart. If we close the valves of our hearts, we die. Hence the image of "Stone" follows that closing. The Soul's attention which is alive at the pausing of the chariots in the previous stanza is now like "Stone," cold, dead, unfeeling, unmoved, a distant and physical counterpart of "divine" Majority. We notice that over against the present tense of "selects," "shuts" and "notes," "present," "choose," and "close" are written in the subjunctive mood. The rejecting



of the world is done, but the Soul is still attentive to the Chariots pausing; henceforward, however, the Soul declares, she will be like "Stone" to the outside of her Society. Employing the military terms, taking the Cavalier attitude, which partly reflected her concern about the Civil War, the poet externalized her own emotion, her ideas of independence in art and life, the magnificence of the soul, her confidence in Heaven, her contempt of the material existence, and perhaps her triumph of her choice of spiritual love for Wadsworth.

By rejecting the physical and choosing the infinite, Emily Dickinson believed that she got "the right of the White Election" (528) — the very Calvinistic concept, the elect by God — which alone enables anybody to see the Soul "at the White Heat" (365), the most intensified creative moment of the Soul. Such a risen soul perceives "the Colossal Substance of Immortality" (306) and commands the survey of the whole macrocosm:

Behind Me — dips Eternity —  
Before Me — Immortality —  
Myself — the Term between —  
Death but the Drift of Eastern Gray,  
Dissolving into Dawn away,  
Before the West begin —

'Tis Kingdoms — afterward — they say —  
In perfect — pauseless Monarchy —  
Whose Prince — is Son of None —  
Himself — His Dateless Dynasty —  
Himself — Himself diversify —  
In Duplicate divine —

'Tis Miracle before Me — then —  
'Tis Miracle behind — between —  
A Crescent in the Sea —  
With Midnight to the North of Her —  
And Midnight to the South of Her —  
And Maelstrom in the Sky — (721)

The speaker, "Me", conceives herself as the term between Eternity unbound by time and Immortality free from the physical. In such a perspective Death is nothing but a daily recurrence of the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. The

symbolism of decay in "Drift" and "Dissolving," enforced by the repeated "d"; and that in "Gray" and "away" linked by the rhyme are contrasted with the hopeful words—"Dawn" and "begin," but the "Dawn" is singularly tied to the decay by the "d" sound. "Me" is the center of the first stanza, who is also the epitome of such a world of decay where the sun daily moves from the east to the west.

The second stanza, on the contrary, stresses "Himself," the "Prince" of the "Kingdoms," by a repetition of "His" and "Himself." Time never pauses in His Monarchy, for His Dynasty is not bound by "Dates." What a difference between the world of "Myself" and the world of "Himself"! The riddle of "Son of None" is solved by "divine." The divine Prince, not of the flesh—God—is the ruler at once of Eternity and of Immortality; thus He is "in Duplicate," a diversified existence. He has many phases, but He is Himself above all His diversity. His kingdoms are said not to be on this earth, but "afterward." The third stanza describes the aspects of His Monarchy. To the temporal "Me", it will be, then, after death, a "Miracle." A "Crescent" which should be in the sky is in the sea and the "Maelstrom" exists in the sky instead of in the sea. The earth moves from the north to the south, so "Midnight" is to the North and to the South of the moon. The usual turning of the earth becomes vertical because everything is above time, mortality and the natural order there. "Me" will be placed in the midst of "Miracles," then.

In that world perspective, the poet's lover, whom she loved "in Vision—and in Veto" (528), of all the souls that stand created (664), and whose face "would put out Jesus' in Heaven" (640) became "the Atom" and a piece of "clay" (664). She reflected upon her love :

We outgrow love, like other things  
And put it in the Drawer—  
Till it an antique fashion shows  
Like Customs Grandsires wore. (887)

Here the most important phase of human psychology—love—is looked upon, exactly as she has regarded her lover as clay, as a thing or a piece of clothing which is to be put in the drawer when it is out of use. “Antique” and “Grandsires” hint that the love affair is already in the past, and that it was not a passionate event but just a custom to “us” who have outgrown it. The “objective correlative” between emotion and expression—the objectified transmuted form of intense emotion”<sup>16</sup>—is kept by the poet’s savage detachment, her ability to look at the conflicts in her own heart—love, grief, despair—at such an esthetic distance. Shakespeare’s tragic note in

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport. (King Lear, IV. i. 38–39)

is ringing here, yet it appears that Emily Dickinson is laughing at her own posture ready to tumble down into self-pity. Her dehumanizing sublimation of emotions, with a contrary effect, flashes out the depth of her sensitiveness to every human experience by its very tone that she utters.

As a scientist deals with his subject, a thing, with clinical precision, the poet usually *measured* her grief “with narrow, probing Eyes” (561). In one poem the speaker gets “A piercing Comfort/ In passing Calvary” (561). This piece was written in about 1862 when Wadsworth accepted the call to Calvary Church in California and this is supposed to have been the year of Emily Dickinson’s “White Election.” To her “Calvary” symbolizes agony, and through agony she came to understand Christianity, for she wrote to a friend—“..but when he (Jesus) confides to us that he is ‘acquainted with Grief,’ we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own.”<sup>17</sup> And she used to project her own image as “Queen of Calvary.” As one denied to drink covets water (490), however, she felt, in the depth of her grief, “glee” at the different signs of Heaven—noon, dawn, sun, orchards, birds, flowers (575), though she could not “dance upon” her toes (314).

I can wade Grief—  
Whole Pools of it—  
I'm used to that—  
But the least push of Joy  
Breaks up my feet—..... (252)

Glee was a divine gift, a compensation in joy for what she endured and also the foretaste of Paradise.

Grief was as important to her esthetic code as to her religion. Grief bends the eye/ Best Beauty's way— (571). She believed that Beauty and Heaven are one (988). She was not, nonetheless, converted to Transcendentalism, which taught its disciples to see in the beauty of nature the manifestation of Providence, for she clearly differentiated the Creator from the created, the mortal from nature which lives on "to Further Seasons" (314). Fundamentally, nature seemed to her as indifferent to human suffering and grief as God. Neither told her that she could learn her secret (314). "No Blossom stayed away/ In gentle deference to me/ The Queen of Calvary—..." (348). Her idea of beauty was deeper and more esthetic than Emersonians'.

I died for Beauty—but was scarce  
Adjusted in the Tomb  
When One who died for Truth, was lain  
In adjoining Room—  
He questioned softly "Why I failed" ?  
"For Beauty", I replied—  
"And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—  
We Brethren, are", He said—  
And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—  
We talked between the Rooms—  
Until the Moss had reached our lips—  
And covered up—our names— (449)

Beauty is as worth dying for as Truth is, and Beauty and Truth are defined as One, without waiting for Immortality to cover the two up, inseparable. As Hazlitt said, to give expression to any given sensible object is to collect its meaning from a thousand other sources, and to bring into play the association and feeling of one's whole life or an infinity of knowledge bearing upon a

single object, and consequently, to the genuine artist, truth, nature, beauty are almost different names for the same thing.<sup>19</sup> Emily Dickinson's esthetic credo was really born of her whole way of life, knowledge, and her Being.

To her Truth was not a mere abstraction:

Truth—is as old as God—  
His Twin identity  
And will endure as long as He  
A Co—Eternity— (836)

Her belief that Truth is synonymous with God made her cautious:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—  
.....  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind— (1129)

As was the case with Moses in Sinai, the dazzling light of God or Truth will blind the living human sight, so Providence and the world are revealed through riddles. Like John Donne's idea in his *Ectstasy* that the body is the book of the soul through which "Love's mystery" is transmitted,<sup>20</sup> the Truth of the cosmic mystery, to Emily Dickinson, must be conveyed by God alone to the individual soul through the senses of the body, "slant," which is to catch the sensation of "Awe," the sense of "A nearness to Tremendousness" (963).

The poet, indeed, had a special faculty to feel abstractions and think sensations. She once said, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry."<sup>21</sup> Her business, Circumference,<sup>22</sup> must be, as Hazlitt said, how to conceive expression to the abstractions, in certain objects, that her body had sensed and that her soul had grasped, and how to project her whole consciousness or Being into that expression because that business of Circumference was not a matter of art but a matter of defining the relationship between man, herself, and God or between the microcosm and the macrocosm; the whole problem of her salvation depended upon it.

In her pursuit of the Riddles by steadily looking at "the White Heat" of her own soul where God, Death, Immortality,

Eternity, Truth, and Beauty come in and go out as in Shakespeare's Sonnets, poet the unfolds a drama of the Soul who was not defeated by Fate(1031) and who lived with ecstasy in life <sup>23</sup> through the conviction:

I never spoke with God  
Nor visited -Heaven -  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the Checks are -given - (1052)

In Emily Dickinson the whole universe was metamorphosed into her own soul and given the definite locality in time and space -1830 -1886 -at Amherst, yet in small duties of life in such a microcosm, this woman whose eyes were "like the Sherry in the Glass, that the Guest leaves," <sup>24</sup>found immortal and infinite meanings:

I tie my Hat -I crease my Shawl -  
Life's little duties do -precisely -  
As the very least  
Were infinite -to me - (443)

This view of life exactly corresponds to what "Circumference" in art meant to her :

This was a Poet -It is That  
Distills amazing sense  
From ordinary Meanings -  
And Attar so immense  
From the familiar species  
That perishes by the Door -  
We wonder it was not Ourselves  
Arrested it -before - (448)

It was, indeed, the distilling...of "amazing sense/ From the ordinary Meanings." For attaining this, she learnt how to transform the actual into metaphors and metaphors into the actual, the things. Her disregard for conventional diction and form, her persistent use of the persona, her coupling the Latinate words with Anglo-Saxon terms, grave themes with familiar and humorous expressions, sometimes to the extent that they offended some readers, and her tactful command of suspense in conveying what she is saying -Emily Dickinson's poetic techniques were, indeed,

native to her way of objectifying and externalizing emotions and of viewing life as "Riddles," because she was keenly aware of the incongruity between appearance and reality and between the finite and the infinite, and eager to examine the irony of life and problems, either theological or metaphysical, on the human plane restricted by time, place, and mortality. There was no use for man—interpreted religion or philosophy, she seemed to say, if they could not be understood by or save any single soul on earth. Like Shakespeare's characters she became wiser through suffering. In the midst of the convulsion of grief, she sensed that God, Truth, and Beauty are One. Her special ability heroically to wade through life alone must have been brought about by the mystic union of her confidence in and love of her own artistic credo and creative drive and her Puritan heritage, absolute independence on anything human, exemplified in the basic doctrine—"That alone is true faith which the spirit of God seals in our hearts."

In her untiring search of the Truth of Life revealed to her Soul she evolved into a great poet and gives us a new light with which to survey our existence in relation to God and other men, but she said :

I took one Draught of Life—  
I'll tell you what I paid—  
Precisely an existence—  
The market price, they said. (1725)

It cost her immensely to get "A Single Dram of Heaven," "Circumference" on earth; nevertheless, it certainly was not "giving [her] taller feet." <sup>25</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The number of the poem is according to *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>George Frisbie Whicher, *This Was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson* (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 183.

<sup>3</sup>Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*, ed. Modern Library (New York, 1964), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup>A. Mervyn Davies, *Foundation of American Freedom* (New York, 1955), p. 189.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>Emily Dickinson, *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, 1958), I, 31.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Anderson, "Words," *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), p. 148.

<sup>10</sup>See *The Encyclopedia Americana* s. v. "Edwards, Jonathan."

<sup>11</sup>Whicher, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup>Davies, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, II, 412.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretative Biography* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 242.

<sup>15</sup>*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, II, 372.

<sup>16</sup>F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (New York, 1947), p. 58.

<sup>17</sup>*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, III, 837.

<sup>18</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* (Boston, 1903), p. 60.

<sup>19</sup>William Hazlitt, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt* (London, 1903), XII, 290, and IV, 74-75.

<sup>20</sup>John Donne, "The Ecstasy," *Poetry of the English Renaissance*, eds. J. William Hebel and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York, 1957), p. 465.

<sup>21</sup>*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, II, 474.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 411.



<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 380. In the summer of 1861 Emily Dickinson wrote to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, her sister-in-law; "Could I make you and Austin—proud—sometime—a great way off—'twould give me taller feet—" This has often been considered as an implication that the poet somehow sensed her destiny ultimately to win distinction by her writing, although it was not within her lifetime.

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